EPIC COMICS

SISTERHOOD OF STEEL 2
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MARVEL

THE SISTERHOOD OF STEEL

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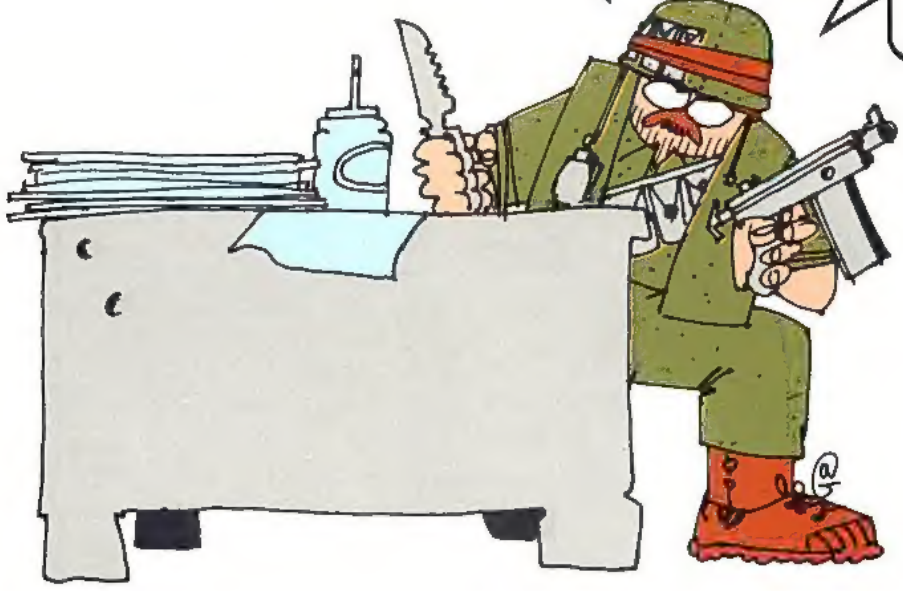
WELCOME TO THE SECOND ISSUE OF ***SISTERHOOD OF STEEL***. I'M ARCHIE GOODWIN, EDITOR OF MARVEL'S ***EPIC COMICS*** LINE. AT CONVENTIONS AND IN FANZINE INTERVIEWS, I'M OFTEN ASKED: "***WHAT KIND OF BOOK IS SISTERHOOD OF STEEL ... SWORDS AND SORCERY OR SOMETHING?***" WELL, SINCE IT'S SET IN A MYTHIC, BARBARIC AGE, THAT'S A NATURAL ASSUMPTION. BUT AS YOU READ IT, I THINK YOU'LL AGREE THAT IT'S ***MORE*** THAN THAT. FOR ITS INSIGHTS INTO THE MAKING AND TRAINING OF A WARRIOR, YOU MIGHT SAY IT'S A ***MARTIAL ARTS*** BOOK. SISTERHOOD'S WRITER ***CHRISTY MARX*** HAS STUDIED BOTH UNARMED COMBAT AND USE OF WEAPONS. YOU PROBABLY SAW THE PICTURES OF HER SHOOTING THE .22 RUGER AUTOMATIC IN A RECENT ***COMICS INTERVIEW***. YOU CAN APPRECIATE HOW THIS SORT OF EXPERTISE AND UNDERSTANDING ADDS TO THE BOOK'S AUTHENTICITY. IT'S EVEN CARRIED OVER TO MY OWN EDITORIAL STANCE.

NOW, CHRISTY, ABOUT THOSE ***SCRIPT CHANGES*** I WANTED TO DISCUSS...



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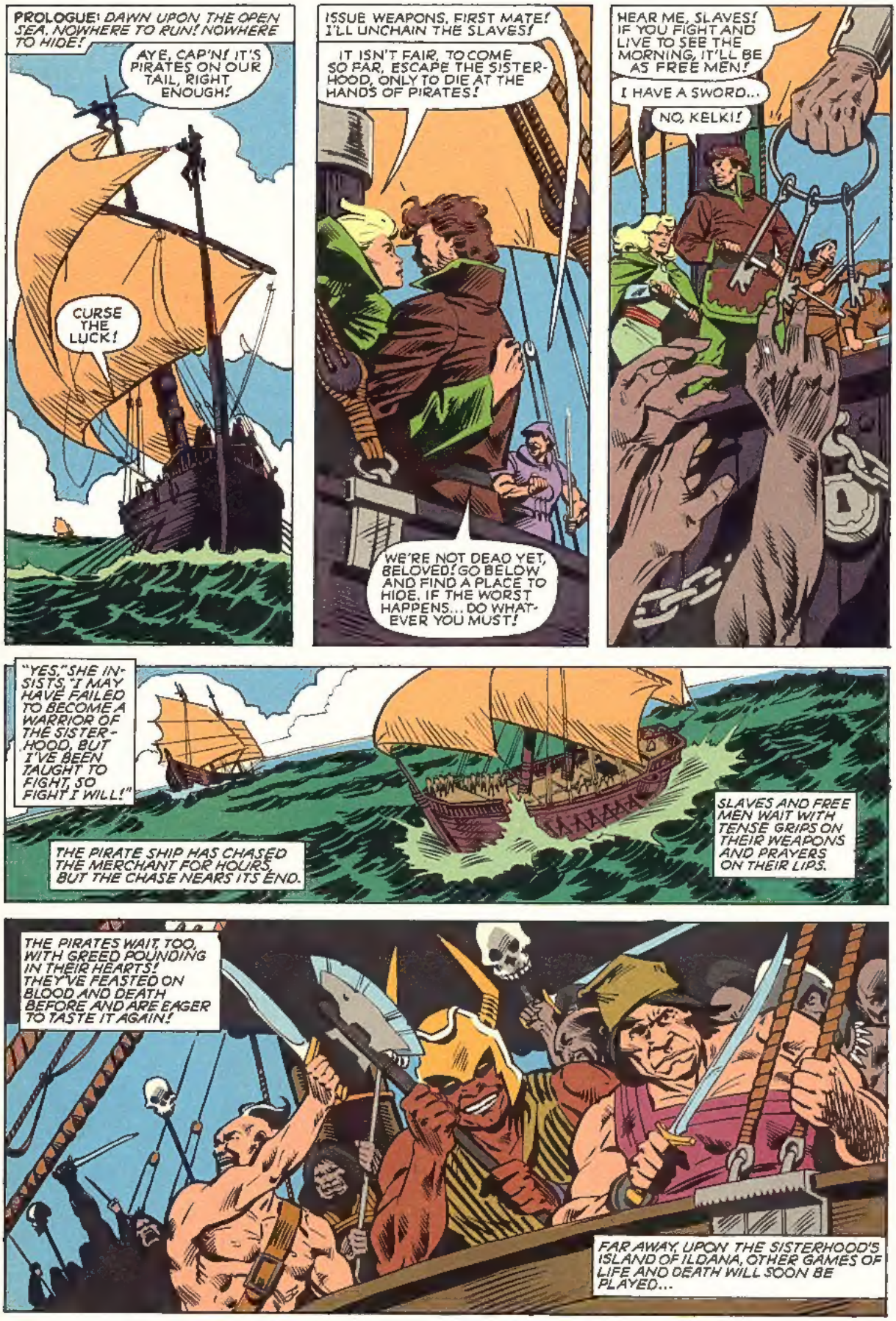
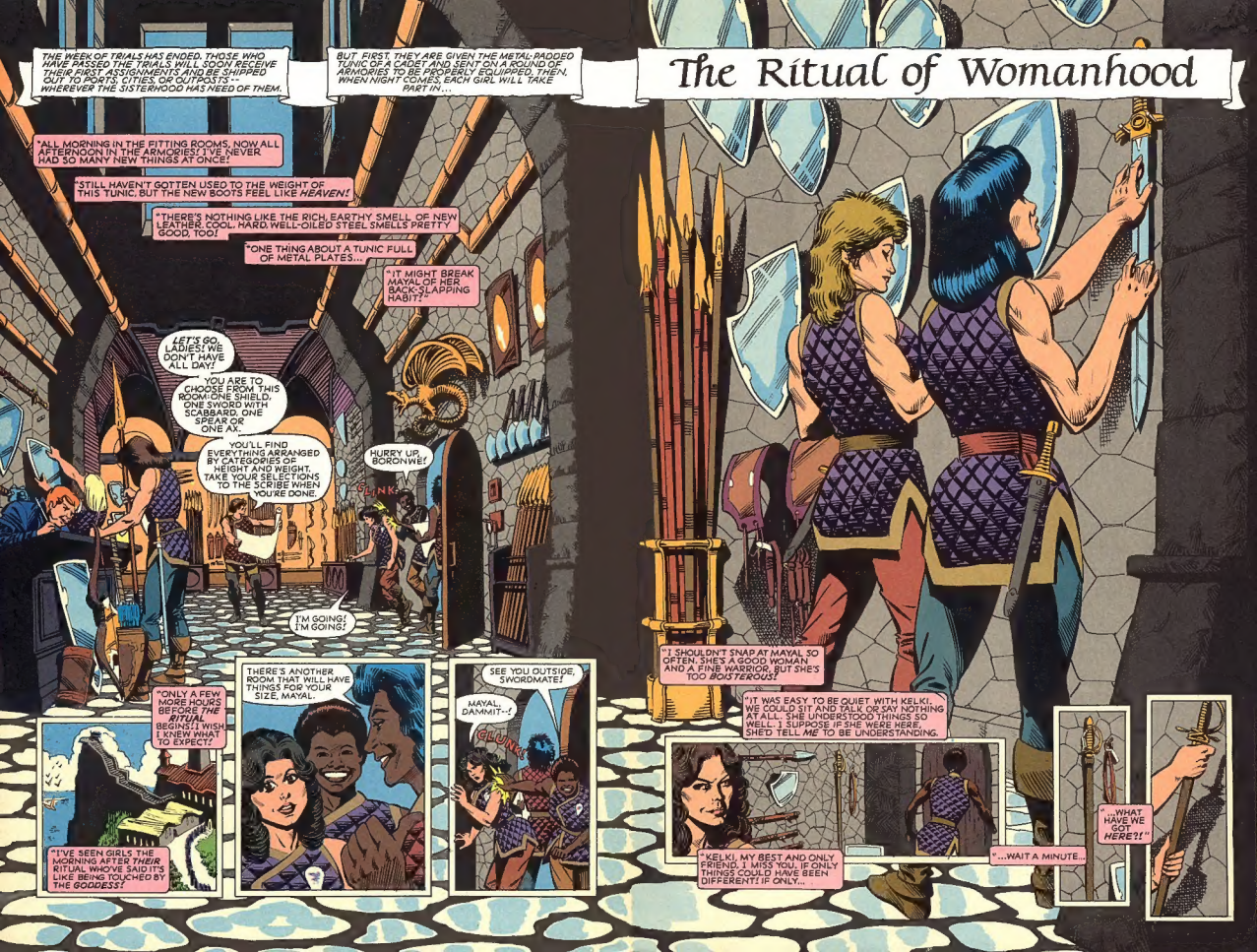

PROLOGUE! DAWN UPON THE OPEN SEA. NOWHERE TO RUN! NOWHERE TO HIDE!
AYE, CAP'N! IT'S PIRATES ON OUR TAIL, RIGHT ENOUGH!
CURSE THE LUCK!
ISSUE WEAPONS, FIRST MATE! I'LL UNCHAIN THE SLAVES!
IT ISN'T FAIR, TO COME SO FAR, ESCAPE THE SISTERHOOD, ONLY TO DIE AT THE HANDS OF PIRATES!
WE'RE NOT DEAD YET, BELOVED! GO BELOW AND FIND A PLACE TO HIDE. IF THE WORST HAPPENS... DO WHATEVER YOU MUST!
HEAR ME, SLAVES! IF YOU FIGHT AND LIVE TO SEE THE MORNING, IT'LL BE AS FREE MEN!
I HAVE A SWORD...
NO, KELKI!
"YES," SHE INSISTS, "I MAY HAVE FAILED TO BECOME A WARRIOR OF THE SISTERHOOD, BUT I'VE BEEN TAUGHT TO FIGHT, SO FIGHT I WILL!"
THE PIRATE SHIP HAS CHASED THE MERCHANT FOR HOURS, BUT THE CHASE NEARS ITS END.
SLAVES AND FREE MEN WAIT WITH TENSE GRIPS ON THEIR WEAPONS AND PRAYERS ON THEIR LIPS.
THE PIRATES WAIT, TOO, WITH GREED POUNDING IN THEIR HEARTS! THEY'VE FEASTED ON BLOOD AND DEATH BEFORE AND ARE EAGER TO TASTE IT AGAIN!
FAR AWAY, UPON THE SISTERHOOD'S ISLAND OF ILDANA, OTHER GAMES OF LIFE AND DEATH WILL SOON BE PLAYED...


The Ritual of Womanhood
THE WEEK OF TRIALS HAS ENDED. THOSE WHO HAVE PASSED THE TRIALS WILL RECEIVE THEIR FIRST ASSIGNMENTS AND BE SHIPPED OUT TO POSTS, CITIES OR OUTPOSTS — WHEREVER THE SISTERHOOD HAS NEED OF THEM.
BUT FIRST, THEY ARE GIVEN THE METAL-PADDED TUNIC OF A CADET AND SENT ON A ROUND OF ARMORIES TO BE PROPERLY EQUIPPED. THEN, WHEN NIGHT COMES, EACH GIRL WILL TAKE PART IN...
"ALL MORNING IN THE FITTING ROOMS, NOW ALL AFTERNOON IN THE ARMORIES! I'VE NEVER HAD SO MANY NEW THINGS AT ONCE!
"STILL HAVEN'T GOTTEN USED TO THE WEIGHT OF THIS TUNIC, BUT THE NEW BOOTS FEEL LIKE HEAVEN!
"THERE'S NOTHING LIKE THE RICH, EARTHY SMELL OF NEW LEATHER. COOL, HARD, WELL-OILED STEEL SMELLS PRETTY GOOD, TOO!
"ONE THING ABOUT A TUNIC FULL OF METAL PLATES...
"IT MIGHT BREAK MAYAL OF HER BACK-SLAPPING HABIT!"
LET'S GO, LADIES! WE DON'T HAVE ALL DAY!
YOU ARE TO CHOOSE FROM THIS ROOM: ONE SHIELD, ONE SWORD WITH SCABBARD, ONE SPEAR OR ONE AX.
YOU'LL FIND EVERYTHING ARRANGED BY CATEGORIES OF HEIGHT AND WEIGHT. TAKE YOUR SELECTIONS TO THE SCRIBE WHEN YOU'RE DONE.
HURRY UP, BORONWE!
CLINK
I'M GOING! I'M GOING!
"ONLY A FEW MORE HOURS BEFORE THE RITUAL BEGINS! I WISH I KNEW WHAT TO EXPECT!
"I'VE SEEN GIRLS THE MORNING AFTER THEIR RITUAL WHO'VE SAID IT'S LIKE BEING TOUCHED BY THE GODDESS!"
THERE'S ANOTHER ROOM THAT WILL HAVE THINGS FOR YOUR SIZE, MAYAL.
SEE YOU OUTSIDE, SWORDMATE!
MAYAL, DAMMIT--!
CLUNK
"I SHOULDN'T SNAP AT MAYAL SO OFTEN. SHE'S A GOOD WOMAN AND A FINE WARRIOR, BUT SHE'S TOO BOISTEROUS!
"IT WAS EASY TO BE QUIET WITH KELKI. WE COULD SIT AND TALK OR SAY NOTHING AT ALL. SHE UNDERSTOOD THINGS SO WELL. I SUPPOSE IF SHE WERE HERE, SHED TELL ME TO BE UNDERSTANDING.
"KELKI, MY BEST AND ONLY FRIEND. I MISS YOU. IF ONLY THINGS COULD HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT! IF ONLY...
"...WAIT A MINUTE...
"...WHAT HAVE WE GOT HERE?!"

HOW DID EVERYONE MISS *THIS* BEAUTY? IT'S PERFECTLY BALANCED! FEELS LIKE IT WAS *MADE* FOR ME!
AND WHAT AN EDGE IT'S GOT! *THIS* IS A BLADE TO WHICH I CAN ENTRUST MY LIFE!
INTERESTING CHOICE. AN *EXCELLENT* BLADE. ONE OF THE LAST WE HAVE BY MASTER CHAND! TAKE GOOD CARE OF IT!
DON'T FORGET TO SELECT YOUR SHIELD...
GROUPS OF CADETS SEEK SHADE FROM THE MIDAFTERNOON SUN, TO COMPARE WEAPONS AND GUESS AT THE MYSTERY OF THE RITUAL WHICH WILL SOON BE UPON THEM. IT IS A DAY OF HIGH HOPES AND GOOD SPIRIT.
ISN'T THAT DELANI OVER THERE?
HEY, DELANI!
I WANT TO SHOW YOU WHAT I...
...DELANI?

WHAT'S THAT ALL ABOUT? YOU THINK BECAUSE I BEAT HER IN WRESTLING...
NAH. IT'S JUST SOUR GRAPES!
SHE ONLY MADE IT TO THIRD CLASS, YOU KNOW. SO SHE DIDN'T GET TO CHOOSE HER GEAR.
SHE GOT STANDARD ISSUE!
FORGET HER! WE'RE GOING TO HAVE A PICNIC UP ON SEAPOINT. LET'S DUMP OUR GEAR AND MEET UP THERE!
I'LL CATCH UP TO YOU LATER! I'VE GOT AN ERRAND TO RUN!
HERE YOU ARE, LANNA! I BROUGHT THE EXTRA POLISH YOU WANTED!
THANK YOU! I'M SORRY I BOTHERED YOU WITH IT!
I DON'T MIND! DO YOU NEED ANYTHING ELSE?
NOT A THING! DON'T WASTE YOUR TIME HERE! YOU SHOULD BE WITH YOUR FRIENDS!
THERE'S PLENTY OF TIME FOR THAT! WE'LL BE SHIPPING OUT TOGETHER!
YOU'RE STILL THINKING LIKE A NOVICE.
A WARRIOR LIVES FROM DAY TO DAY. YOUR SWORDMATES MIGHT DIE IN THE FIRST BATTLE OR--
WELL, I SHOULDN'T BE LECTURING YOU TODAY, OF ALL DAYS!
ANYWAY, I THOUGHT YOU'D LIKE TO SEE WHAT I FOUND. IT'S ONE OF THE LAST BY...
DON'T TELL ME!
THE STYLE AND LINES ARE DEFINITELY RANDARA DYNASTY. BUT IT'S THE TEMPERING PATTERNS THAT TELL THE TALE. LET'S SEE...
MASTER CHAND, OR I'LL EAT MY SHIELD!
RIGHT, AS ALWAYS!
WISH I COULD DO THAT!

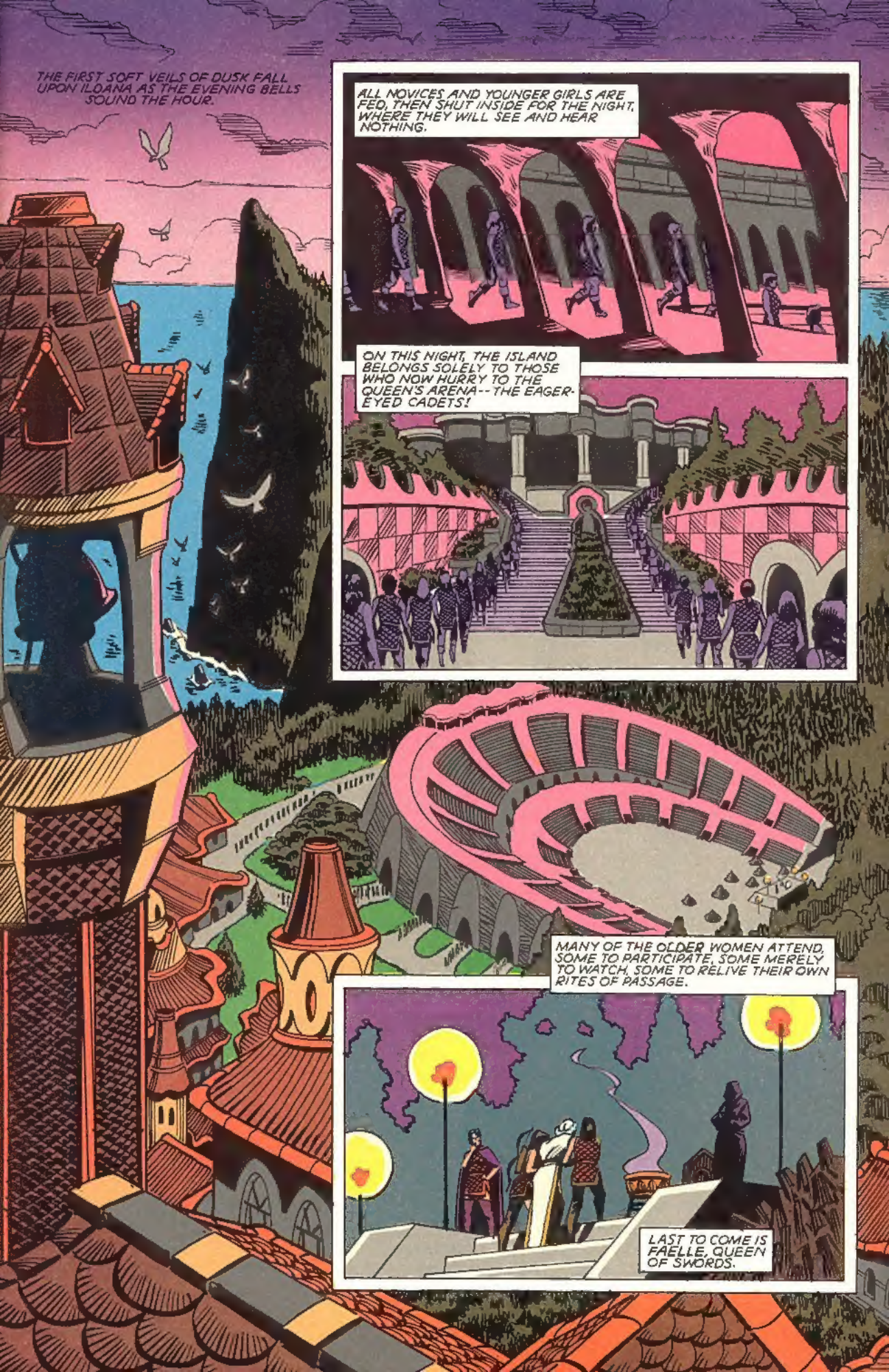
Oh, GIVE YOURSELF TWENTY YEARS AND YOU WILL! YOU'VE DONE VERY WELL, BORONWÉ. YOU MAKE ME PROUD!
SO GOOD ARE YOU LITTLE BORONWÉ, LITTLE PET!
YOU THINK YOU'VE SHAPED AND TEMPERED HER INTO A FINE WEAPON, LANNA--AND DREAM OF THE DAY YOU CAN USE HER AGAINST ME!
DREAM ON, YOU OLD FOOL! SHE HAS YET TO BE CAUGHT BETWEEN THE HAMMER AND THE ANVIL--BUT SHE WILL, AND SOONER THAN YOU THINK!
TONIGHT, I WILL TEST HER SPIRIT!
YES, AND MY OWN AS WELL!
BY WHAT...
...SMALL...
...ERRANT...
...CHANCES...
...MIGHT A LIFE...
...BE SAVED?
THE PRINCESS... WITH A HANDFUL OF BRAMBLE-FLOWERS!
BY THE GODDESS, SHE'S PICKING THEM!
THE PRIESTESS MUST KNOW AT ONCE!

FROM LIGHT...
...INTO SHADOW.
FROM WHAT SEEMS TO BE...
...TO WHAT IS!
GREYAN, PRIESTESS OF SWORDS, IS MISTRESS OF SHADOWS AND SECRETS. WITH HER DAUGHTERS OF DEATH, SHE ACCOMPLISHES BY STEALTH WHAT THE SISTERHOOD CANNOT GAIN BY FORCE.
BUT THERE ARE SECRETS WITHIN SECRETS, AND NO OTHER SISTER SAVE THE QUEEN OF SWORDS KNOWS OF THE PREPARATIONS TAKING PLACE IN THIS ROOM, A SECRET WHICH IS THE HEART OF THE RITUAL OF WOMANHOOD!
WATCH THE FIRE! THE BREW MUST NOT BOIL TOO VIGOROUSLY LEST WE POISON THE BATCH!

PRIESTESS, A WORD WITH YOU!
SPEAK!

THE DAUGHTER OF DEATH WHISPERS OF WHAT SHE HAS SEEN. SHE SPEAKS SIMPLY AND OFFERS NO GUESSES OR OPINION...
...YET WITH EACH WORD, GREYAN'S ANXIETY GROWS, UNTIL SHE MURMURS BUT ONE WORD...
VANDALIS!

YOU'VE DONE WELL, MY DAUGHTER. I GIVE YOU THIS DUTY... FOR THE REST OF THIS DAY AND NIGHT, KEEP WATCH ON VANDALIS. REPORT TO ME IMMEDIATELY IF YOU OBSERVE ANYTHING THAT CONFIRMS MY FEARS!


THE FIRST SOFT VEILS OF DUSK FALL UPON ILOANA AS THE EVENING BELLS SOUND THE HOUR.
ALL NOVICES AND YOUNGER GIRLS ARE FED, THEN SHUT INSIDE FOR THE NIGHT, WHERE THEY WILL SEE AND HEAR NOTHING.
ON THIS NIGHT, THE ISLAND BELONGS SOLELY TO THOSE WHO NOW HURRY TO THE QUEEN'S ARENA--THE EAGER-EYED CADETS!
MANY OF THE OLDER WOMEN ATTEND, SOME TO PARTICIPATE, SOME MERELY TO WATCH, SOME TO RELIVE THEIR OWN RITES OF PASSAGE.
LAST TO COME IS FAELLE, QUEEN OF SWORDS.

I HEARD THAT COMMANDER GILL SAID THAT THE QUEEN WON'T LIVE OUT THE YEAR AND SHE'S ALREADY NAMED VANDALIS HER SUCCESSOR! THEY SAY.
SHHHH.. SHE'S SPEAKING!
SISTERS, FRIENDS AND WARRIORS! TONIGHT WE HONOR THESE CADETS WHO HAVE WON THE RIGHT TO STAND WITH US IN THIS HALLOWED ARENA! THEY ARE THE FRESH HOPE, THE NEW INSPIRATION, THE LIFE-BLOOD OF THE SISTERHOOD!
YOUNG WOMEN, I CHARGE YOU TO GO FORTH AND SERVE FAITHFULLY, TO PRESERVE OUR FREEDOM AND INDEPENDENCE BY THE SKILL OF YOUR SWORDS, THAT WE MAY NEVER BECOME THE SLAVES OF MEN! IT IS NOT ISLAND OR STONE WALLS, BUT EACH ONE OF YOU THAT IS THE TRUE BASTION OF THE SISTERHOOD!
SERVE WELL, WITH COURAGE AND WITH PRIDE, THAT THE SPIRIT OF THE SISTERHOOD WILL ENDURE
AND BURN BRIGHTLY!
WE'RE WAITING, GREYAN!
YOUR MAGICK GROWS WEAKER EACH YEAR! PERHAPS IT'S TIME YOU NAMED A SUCCESSOR!
GREYAN SAYS NOTHING

VANDALIS FIRES THE BURNING ARROW INTO ONE OF THE PYRAMIDAL STACKS OF WOOD. HER STRONG VOICE RINGS OUT ACROSS THE ARENA.
TODAY YOU ARE WOMEN! LIGHT THE FIRES AND DRINK DEEPLY OF THE CUP OF SISTERHOOD!
AROUND EACH BONFIRE, CADETS JOIN HANDS AND FORM CIRCLES.
CUPS OF POLISHED AGATE, JADE AND VARIEGATED QUARTZ FILLED WITH A STRANGE, FRAGRANT LIQUID ARE PASSED FROM HAND TO HAND ..
MAY THE GODDESS FIND ME WORTHY AND GRANT ME LONG LIFE!
... A CUP TO BE SHARED!

AS THE DRUG TAKES HOLD, THEY SING ..

VOICES RAISED..

.. IN SWEET UNISON...

.HEARTS. .

...AND...

...MINDS...

...JOINED...

. IN SONGS OF BATTLE.

.. AND UNITY. .

... FRIENDSHIP.

AND SACRIFICE!

TIME BECOMES AN ENDLESS, FLOWING MOMENT...

.. A MOMENT OF SONG...

.OF DANCE.

...OF WARMTH...

WAVES OF EUPHORIA...

... WASHING OVER THEM, LIFTING UP THEIR SOULS...

. FILLING THEM WITH SISTERLY LOVE THE MOMENT FLOWS ON..

THE SONG BECOMES SILENCE

THE DANCE QUIETS TO STILLNESS .

. A TIME TO REFLECT.

. . MEDITATE.

EXPLORE..

...TO REGAIN ONE'S OWN SELF AMONGST THE MANY.

YET THE UNENDING CIRCLE REMAINS, AN INFUSION OF SUBTLE POWER AND OF ..

.. TOLERANCE AND UNDERSTANDING OF ALL YOUR SISTERS!

THIS NIGHT OF PEACE IS YOURS. GO WHERE YOU WILL, WITH WHOM YOU WILL, BUT KNOW YOU ARE NOW AND FOREVER A WOMAN OF THE SISTERHOOD!

GO WITH THE BLESSINGS OF THE GODDESS WHO WATCHES OVER YOU!

FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE KELKI RAN AWAY, I FEEL CONTENT TO BE ALONE!

BORONWE, I'M GLAD I FOUND YOU!

I WANT YOU TO KNOW I'M SORRY ABOUT THE WAY I ACTED THIS AFTERNOON. NOW I SEE HOW CHILDISH IT WAS.

WE'RE SISTERS, DELANI! THAT'S ALL THAT MATTERS!

YOU HAVE NOT YET SHARED A CUP WITH ME!

WHY DO YOU LOOK SO *WARY*, CADET? WE HAVE HAD HARSH WORDS IN THE COURSE OF DUTY, BUT THIS IS THE PURPOSE OF THE RITUAL, TO TEAR DOWN OLD BARRIERS AND FIND NEW RESOLUTIONS!

DO YOU *REFUSE* TO DRINK WITH ME, AS ONE SISTER TO ANOTHER?

I CAN HARDLY REFUSE THE PRINCESS OF SWORDS, THOUGH I'M SURE I DON'T DESERVE THIS *HONOR*!

ALL MY PEACE SHATTERED! WHAT DOES SHE WANT WITH ME? COULD IT BE POISON?

I'LL DRINK FIRST, TO RELIEVE THE FEARS YOU CONCEAL SO POORLY!

WELL?

"SHE MAKES IT A CHALLENGE.."

ONE THAT I *MUST* ACCEPT!

"IT'S LIKE THE OTHER DRINK, ONLY STRONGER, WITH A SMELL I FEEL I OUGHT TO KNOW!"

DRINK! DRAIN THE CUP!

SHE'S LACED IT WITH HONEY, BUT I CAN TASTE THE BI . BITTERNESS... B-BENEATH . . I .

UNGH! GODDESS!

PAIN! HOT PAIN! FIRE! MY EYES, BURNING!

NO, IT'S COLD! BURNING COLD! IT'S. .

DANGER!

A TRAP! A TRAP! ALL AROUND! RUN! DON'T LET IT GET ME! KEEP AWAY!

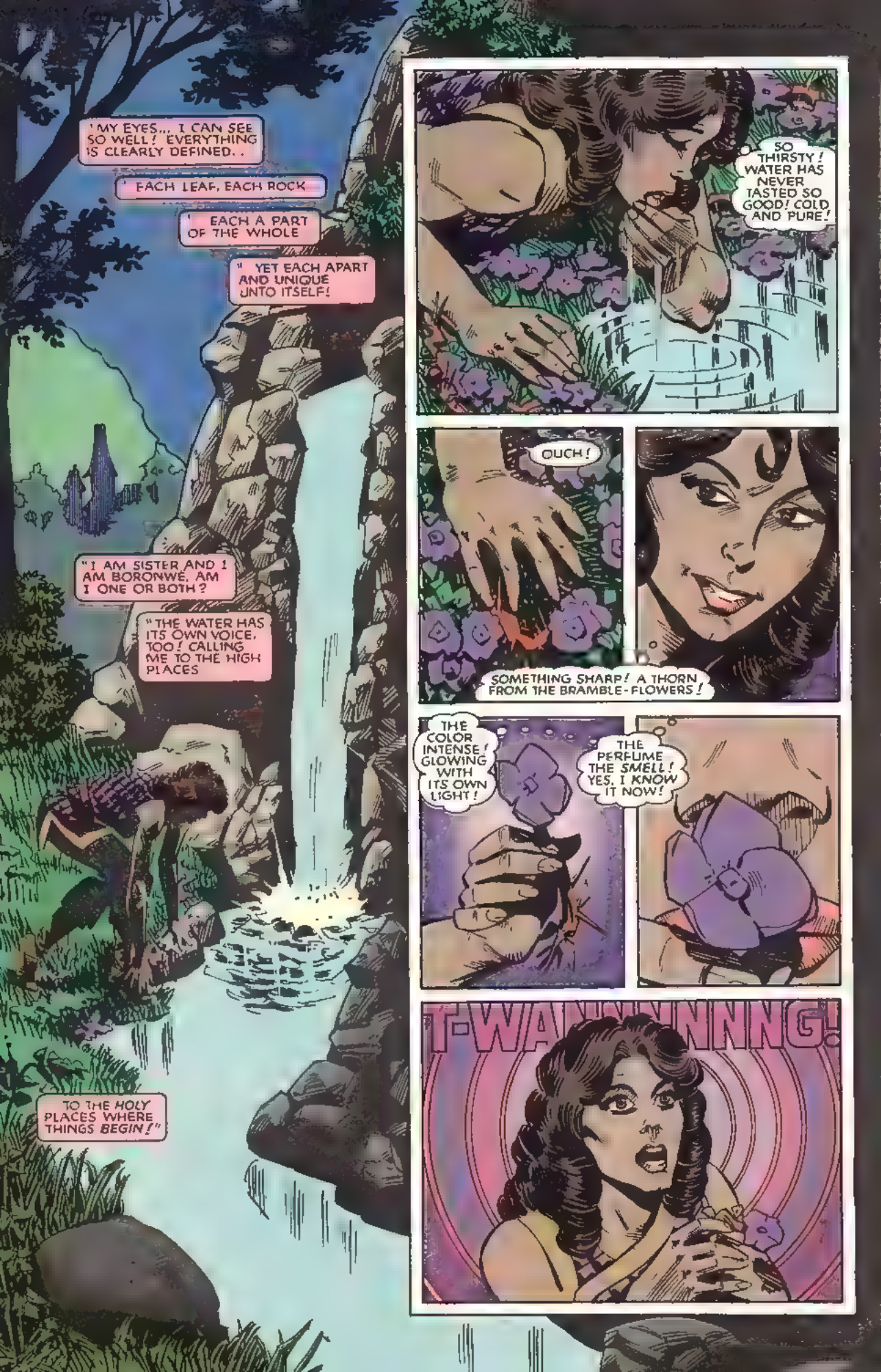
CLOSING .N! GOT TO GET AWAY! GET AWAY!

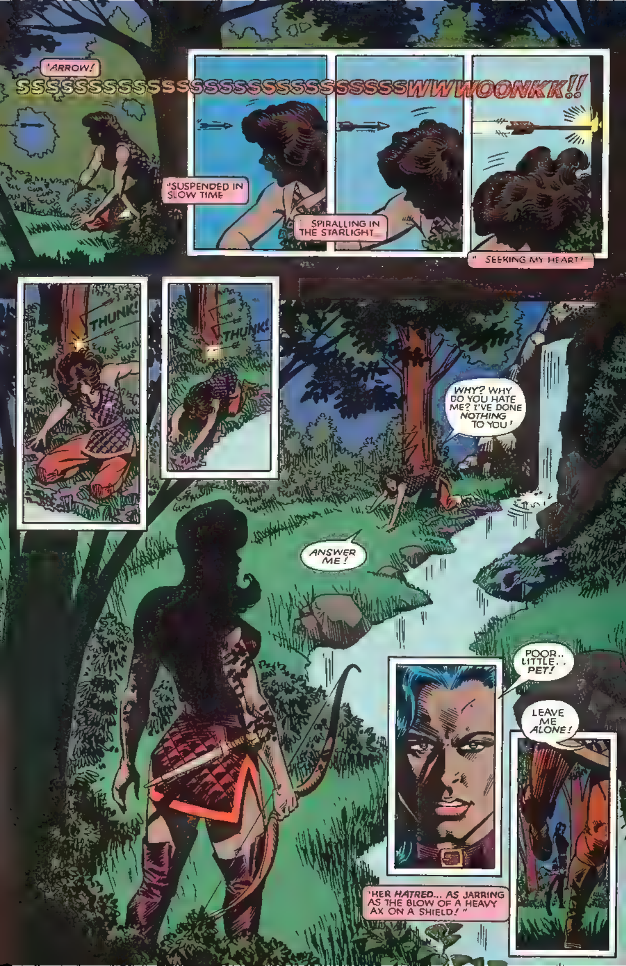
ENTER!

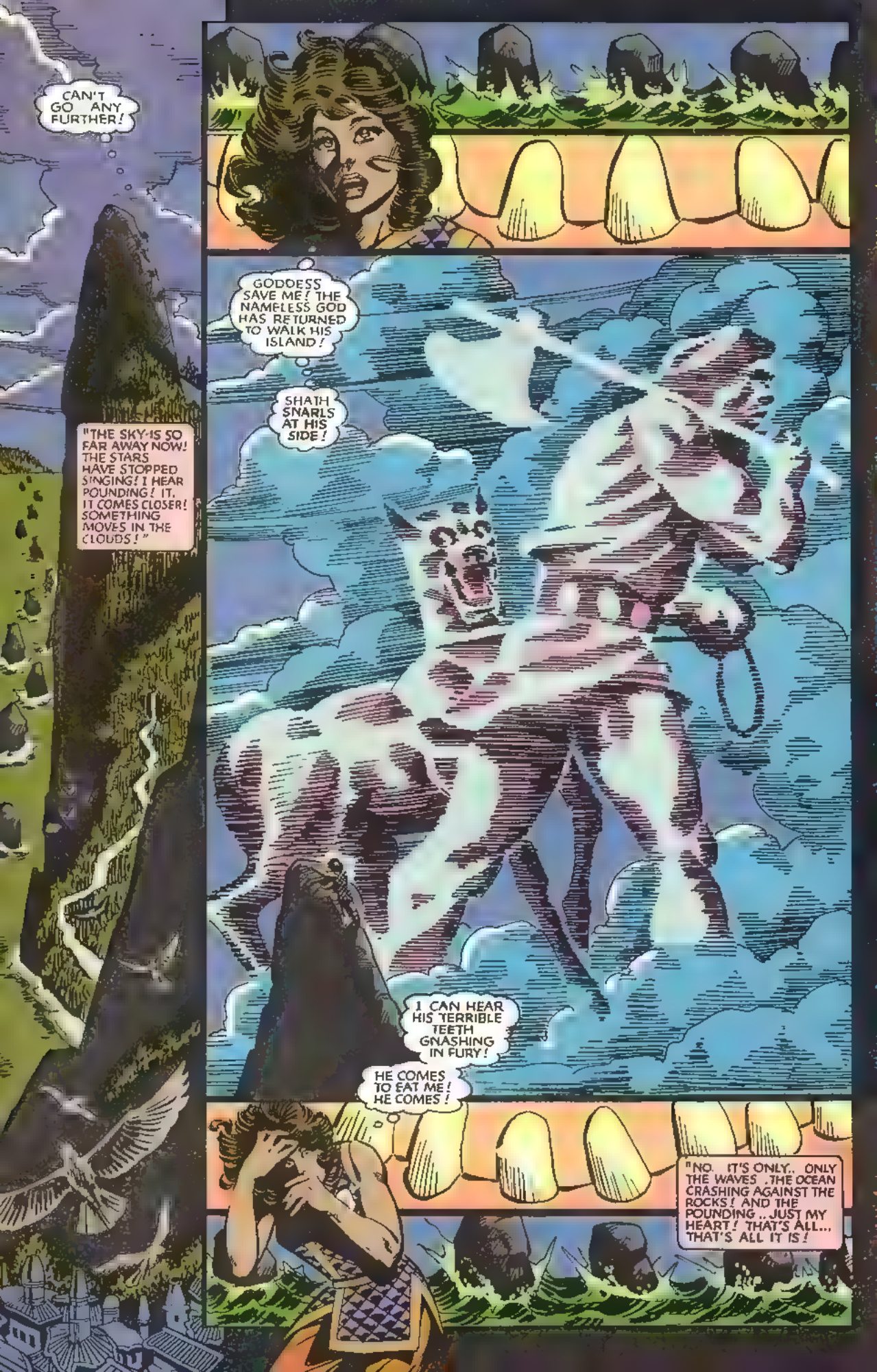
THE HOUR IS LATE, DAUGHTER! WHAT HAVE YOU SEEN?

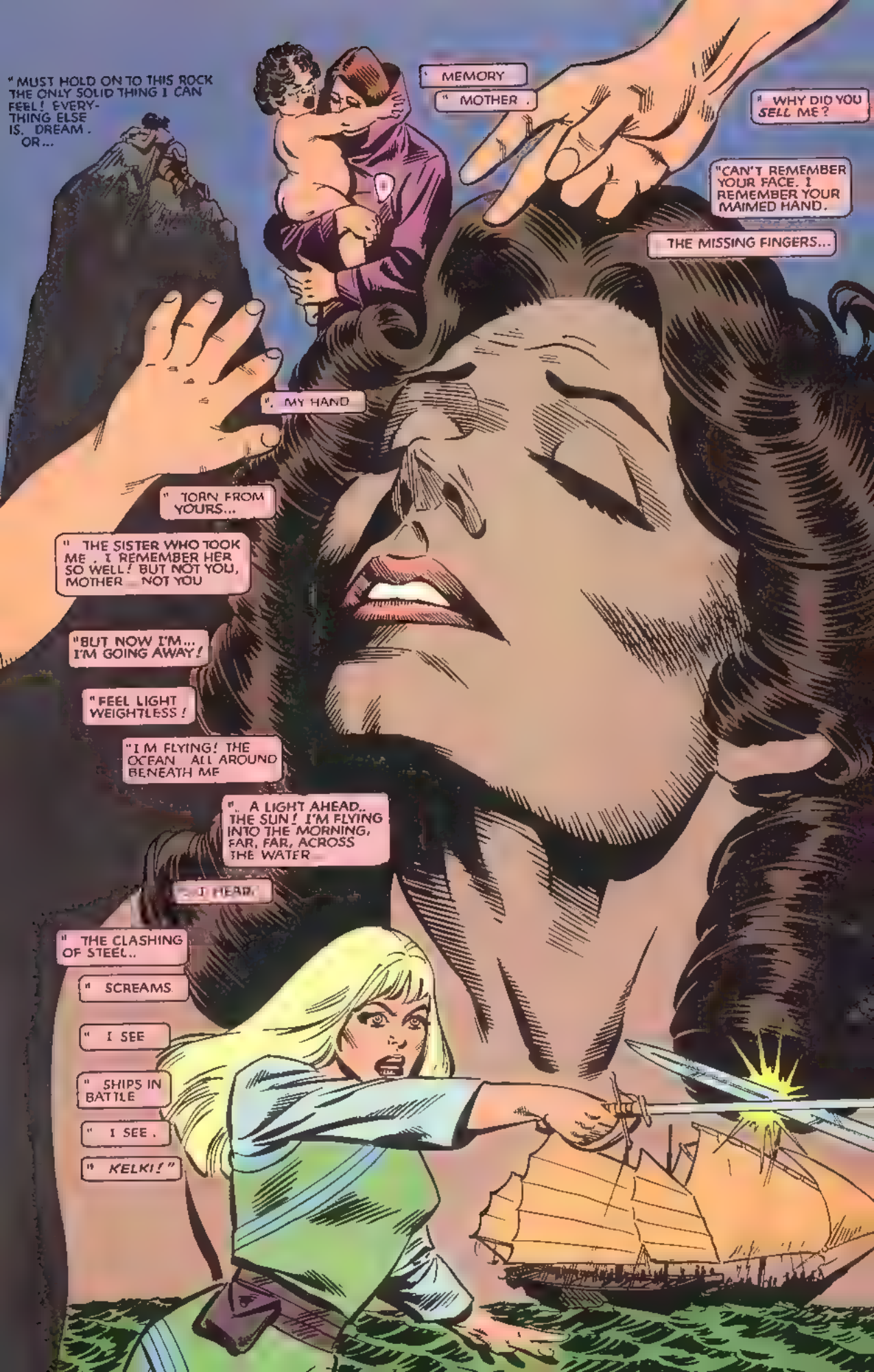
DAMN HER BLACK SOUL!

DAUGHTERS! PREPARE TO HUNT!
SEARCH THE HILLS! FIND VANDALIS .
OR THE CADET, BORONWE!
FIND THEM! SPARE NOT AN INSTANT!
DEATH AND MADNESS SNAPS AT THEIR HEELS!
CHING CHING CHING CHING CHING CHING
CHING CHING
'THE NIGHT SKY LIKE A DOME OF CRYSTAL
"...SO CLOSE! I COULD TOUCH IT IF I COULD GET TO THE TOP! IF I KEEP CLIMBING!
"STARS...SINGING! CHIMING LIKE SILVER BELLS! RINGING AND RINGING! SWEET SILVER VOICES!
CHING CHING CHING CHING
CHING CHING CHING CHING CHING


"MY EYES... I CAN SEE SO WELL! EVERYTHING IS CLEARLY DEFINED..
" EACH LEAF, EACH ROCK
" EACH A PART OF THE WHOLE
" YET EACH APART AND UNIQUE UNTO ITSELF!
"I AM SISTER AND I AM BORONWE. AM I ONE OR BOTH?
"THE WATER HAS ITS OWN VOICE, TOO! CALLING ME TO THE HIGH PLACES
TO THE HOLY PLACES WHERE THINGS BEGIN!"
SO THIRSTY! WATER HAS NEVER TASTED SO GOOD! COLD AND PURE!
OUCH!
SOMETHING SHARP! A THORN FROM THE BRAMBLE-FLOWERS!
THE COLOR INTENSE! GLOWING WITH ITS OWN LIGHT!
THE PERFUME THE SMELL! YES, I KNOW IT NOW!
T-WANNNNNG!


'ARROW!
SSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSWWWOONKK!!
'SUSPENDED IN SLOW TIME
SPIRALLING IN THE STARLIGHT
" SEEKING MY HEART!
THUNK!
THUNK!
WHY? WHY DO YOU HATE ME? I'VE DONE NOTHING TO YOU!
ANSWER ME!
POOR.. LITTLE.. PET!
LEAVE ME ALONE!
'HER HATRED... AS JARRING AS THE BLOW OF A HEAVY AX ON A SHIELD!"


CAN'T GO ANY FURTHER!
"THE SKY IS SO FAR AWAY NOW! THE STARS HAVE STOPPED SINGING! I HEAR POUNDING! IT. IT COMES CLOSER! SOMETHING MOVES IN THE CLOUDS!"
GODDESS SAVE ME! THE NAMELESS GOD HAS RETURNED TO WALK HIS ISLAND!
SHATH SNARLS AT HIS SIDE!
I CAN HEAR HIS TERRIBLE TEETH GNASHING IN FURY!
HE COMES TO EAT ME! HE COMES!
"NO. IT'S ONLY.. ONLY THE WAVES .THE OCEAN CRASHING AGAINST THE ROCKS! AND THE POUNDING .. JUST MY HEART! THAT'S ALL... THAT'S ALL IT IS!


" MUST HOLD ON TO THIS ROCK THE ONLY SOLID THING I CAN FEEL! EVERY-THING ELSE IS, DREAM. OR...
" MEMORY
" MOTHER.
" WHY DID YOU SELL ME?
"CAN'T REMEMBER YOUR FACE. I REMEMBER YOUR MAIMED HAND.
THE MISSING FINGERS...
". MY HAND
" TORN FROM YOURS...
" THE SISTER WHO TOOK ME. I REMEMBER HER SO WELL! BUT NOT YOU, MOTHER... NOT YOU
"BUT NOW I'M... I'M GOING AWAY!
"FEEL LIGHT WEIGHTLESS!
"I'M FLYING! THE OCEAN ALL AROUND BENEATH ME
".. A LIGHT AHEAD.. THE SUN! I'M FLYING INTO THE MORNING, FAR, FAR, ACROSS THE WATER...
" I HEAR.
" THE CLASHING OF STEEL..
" SCREAMS
" I SEE
" SHIPS IN BATTLE
" I SEE.
" KELKI!"

KELKI! WHERE IS YOUR SHIELD? WHERE IS YOUR HELMET?
PUT DOWN YOUR PINSTICKER, GIRL! YOU CAN'T BEST ME!
"KELKI, THE RAILING! YOU'LL BE PINNED! GET YOUR BLADE UP! PARRY HIS CUT!"
DROP IT, GIRL!
N-NO!
'SHE CAN'T HEAR ME! HE'S UPON HER!"
TONIGHT I'LL SHOW YOU MY OTHER SWORD!
'GET YOUR HANDS OFF HER! GET THEM OFF, YOU"
NO, PLEASE.
FILTHY PIRATE!
WHAT THE DEVIL?
THE DEVIL HAVE YOU THEN!
SEAMEN, HEAR ME!

PULL YOUR RANKS TOGETHER!
FORM A WEDGE!
FOLLOW ME! DRIVE THEM TO THE SEA!
SHE'S A MADWOMAN!
BACK TO THE SHIP, BROTHERS!
LET'S AWAY!
I DON'T KNOW WHAT POSSESSED YOU, BUT YOU WERE MAGNIFICENT MY LOVE!
KELKI!
BUT IT WASN'T ME! IT— ohhh.
BORONWE, COME BACK!
CALM DOWN, BELOVED! THERE'S NOTHING THERE!
NO, SHE WAS HERE! SHE SAVED US!
BORONWE!
"I CAN'T COME BACK, MY FRIEND!
"MY BODY CALLS ME
' AND I MUST RETURN

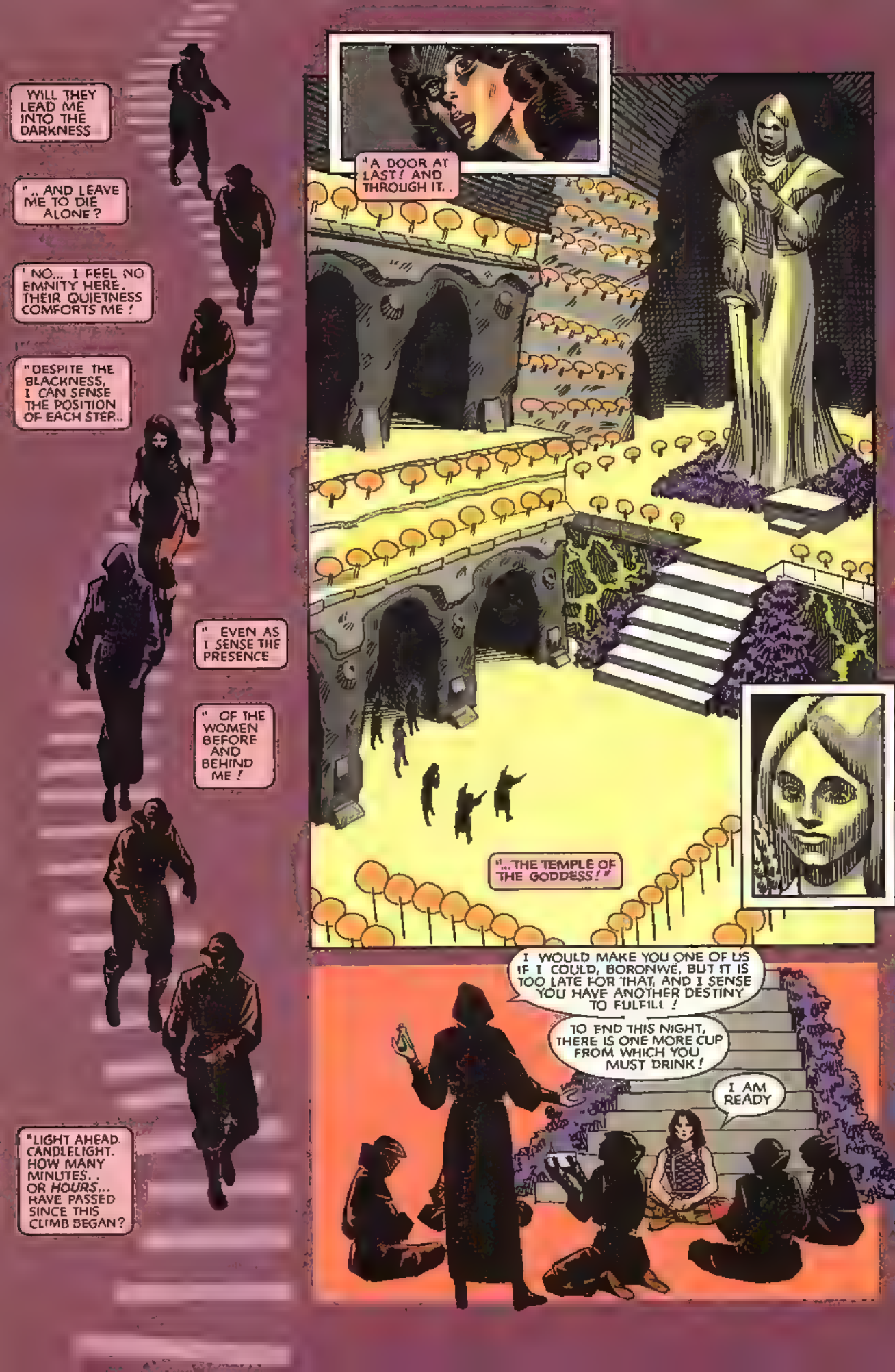
'I GIVE MYSELF TO YOU
I WILL STRETCH OUT MY ARMS
" AND STEP INTO THE NIGHT!
"FREE ME
'TAKE ME, GODDESS!'
THROW YOURSELF!
FIRST YOU RUN FROM ME! NOW YOU RUN FROM LIFE ITSELF!
DON'T STAND THERE *THINKING* ABOUT IT! *JUMP*, YOU MILK-SUCKING COWARD!

I RAN FROM YOU BECAUSE I DARED DRINK THE CUP OF SISTERHOOD WITH YOU, AND GOT ONLY MADNESS IN RETURN!
I RAN BECAUSE I'M ONLY A CADET AND YOU'RE THE PRINCESS OF SWORDS AND WHO AM I TO FIGHT WITH YOU?
I'LL TELL YOU WHO I AM!
I'M BORONWE OF THE SISTERHOOD! AND I'M AS MUCH A WOMAN AND A WARRIOR AS YOU!
THEN PROVE IT!
MY TUNIC TURNED HER KNIFE!
SHE TRULY MEANS TO KILL ME!
AND I HAVE NO WEAPON BUT MY EATING DAGGER!
IT WILL HAVE TO DO!
I WILL NOT DIE SO EASILY, MY LADY..
..JUST FOR YOUR PLEASURE!
MY FACE! YOU'VE RUINED MY FACE!

WHAT'S SHE SCREAMING ABOUT?
I DIDN'T GET HER FACE! I JUST WANTED TO DRIVE HER BACK!
THIS IS NO GOOD! I DON'T DARE CUT UP MY SUPERIOR OFFICER!
I CAN'T MATCH HER BATTLE EXPERIENCE OR CUNNING!
VANDALIS, THIS CAN'T GO ON! LISTEN TO M--
SHUT UP AND FIGHT, BITCH!
I WON'T HEAR YOU! I WON'T LISTEN!
HOLDING HER FOR NOW BUT CAN'T
YAIIEE!!

I AM PRINCESS OF SWORDS! I DECIDE WHO LIVES AND DIES!
WHO DARES?!
RELEASE MY ARM, DAMN YOU! I ORDER YOU--
SHE DOESN'T TAKE HER ORDERS FROM YOU!
YOU HAVE TRESPASSED MOST SERIOUSLY, VANDALIS
. TAMPERED WITH SECRETS YOU HAVE *NO RIGHT* TO KNOW, THREATENED AN UNTRIED CADET! THE *QUEEN* WILL HEAR OF THIS!
YOU'RE A MEDDLER, GREYAN! JEALOUS OF YOUR *FADING* POWER!
WHEN *I* AM QUEEN, YOU'LL *TREMBLE* BEFORE ME!
DO WHAT YOU WILL! I FEAR *NOTHING!*

REST EASY, CHILD.
LET'S TEND TO THAT BITE, LEST RABIES SHOULD SET IN, eh?
R-RABIES?
MERELY A JEST, BORONWÉ!
OH
FORGIVE ME! I SEE YOU'RE STILL DEEP IN THE GRIP OF THE DRUG!
YES.. THE BRAMBLE FLOWER
YOU KNOW THIS? DID VANDALIS TELL YOU?
NO, PRIESTESS! I KNEW IT BY THE SMELL AND IT... IT GLOWED!
THIS IS ANOTHER MATTER, MY DEAR YOU MUST COME WITH US! DO NOT BE AFRAID!
"A TUNNEL HIDDEN IN THE ROCKS! BUT WHY DO THEY THROW DOWN THE TORCHES NOW WHEN IT'S PITCH BLACK INSIDE?"
YOU WALK NOW WHERE NONE GO BUT THE DAUGHTERS OF DEATH! STAY CLOSE!


WILL THEY LEAD ME INTO THE DARKNESS
"..AND LEAVE ME TO DIE ALONE?
"NO... I FEEL NO EMNITY HERE. THEIR QUIETNESS COMFORTS ME!
"DESPITE THE BLACKNESS, I CAN SENSE THE POSITION OF EACH STEP..
"EVEN AS I SENSE THE PRESENCE
"OF THE WOMEN BEFORE AND BEHIND ME!
"LIGHT AHEAD. CANDLELIGHT. HOW MANY MINUTES.. OR HOURS... HAVE PASSED SINCE THIS CLIMB BEGAN?
"A DOOR AT LAST! AND THROUGH IT..
"...THE TEMPLE OF THE GODDESS!"
I WOULD MAKE YOU ONE OF US IF I COULD, BORONWE, BUT IT IS TOO LATE FOR THAT, AND I SENSE YOU HAVE ANOTHER DESTINY TO FULFILL!
TO END THIS NIGHT, THERE IS ONE MORE CUP FROM WHICH YOU MUST DRINK!
I AM READY

BEFORE YOU PARTAKE OF THIS CUP... BE *WARNED!* IT BINDS YOU TO US IN A *BLOOD OATH* OF EVER-LASTING *SECRECY*...
...THAT YOU WILL *NEVER* SPEAK OF THESE EVENTS, NOR REVEAL TO *ANYONE* THE SECRET OF THE BRAMBLE-FLOWER!
IF YOU DRINK OF THIS CUP WITH A *FALSE* OATH IN YOUR HEART, YOU WILL *DIE!*
IF YOUR HEART IS *TRUE*, IT WILL *NOT* HARM YOU!
... AWFULLY WARM... MUST'VE SLEPT... THROUGH MORNING BELLS...

"WHAT DAY IS THIS?"
HOW DID I GET HERE?
I WAS IN THE TEMPLE... I DRANK AND THEN...
I GUESS I PASSED OUT!
BUT MY TUNIC! THERE'S NO CUT IN IT!
DID ANY OF IT REALLY HAPPEN?
THIS ACHE IN MY WRIST TELLS ME IT DID!
I SHOULD THANK YOU, VANDALIS! THE RITUAL IS A CHILD'S GAME, A PAT ON THE HEAD BEFORE THEY SEND US OFF TO WAR! BUT THANKS TO YOU, MY ENEMY...
"...TODAY I AM A WOMAN!"
SCRIBE...
...END MY ORDERS TO COMMANDER GLESPA...
...WITH THIS ENCODED MESSAGE...
...AMONG THE CADETS IN YOUR DETAIL WILL BE BORONWË. CADET FIRST CLASS. WATCH HER CAREFULLY FOR SIGNS OF TREASON...
...AND WHEN YOU SEE THEM,... ARREST HER!
SIGNED, VANDALIS... PRINCESS OF SWORDS!

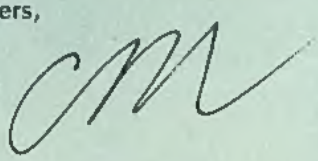
REMARKS BY MARX

For those of you who may have missed out on issue #1, I'm once again presenting you with a glossary of Who's Who & What, with a few additions.

By #3, we hope to have gotten lots of mail, full of thoughtful comments, detailed analysis of what you like or don't like, what works or doesn't work, useful criticism and some indication of the direction you'd like to see the stories take. Would you like to see these appendices continue, in addition to a letters page?

Don't let our creative paranoias fester! Write to us!

Cheers,



GLOSSARY

Who's Who, What and Where

Ambyre: (am buyer) Commander 1st Class of the Sisterhood. Nicknamed "The Merry Widowmaker."

Boronwë: (buh RON way) 17-year-old Cadet 1st Class of the Sisterhood. This designation means she has excelled in her studies as a novice and is expected to do well enough in the field to survive and become an officer.

Daughters of Death: shadowy assassination arm of the Sisterhood, commanded by the Priestess. Skilled in the use of drugs and poisons.

Delani: Cadet 3rd Class of the Sisterhood.

Faelle: (Fay ELL) Queen of Swords, chosen ruler of the Sisterhood.

Gill: Commander 1st Class of the Sisterhood and their most highly ranked warrior-diplomat and chief negotiator on behalf of the Queen.

Glespa: Commander 1st Class of the Sisterhood. The oldest and toughest woman still in active duty, and possibly the most powerful military commander next to Vandalis.

Goddess: the Goddess by which the Sisterhood swears is an earth-mother entity with no name, who symbolizes the endless cycle of life, death and rebirth.

Greyan: (gray YAN) Priestess of Swords. One of the three women who rule the Matrix of the Sisterhood. Keeper of the Temple of the Goddess and of the secret knowledge of drugs and poisons, overseer of religious instruction of all young trainees, and commander of the Daughters of Death.

Ildana: (ill DAH nuh) the island fortress-home of the Sisterhood.

Kelki: (KELL key) Boronwë's best friend. They were raised together as swordmates. Ran away from the Sisterhood with her lover, Vossë, when she failed to make the cut from Novice to Cadet.

Lanna: (LAH nah) Captain-Instructor 1st Class of the Sisterhood. One of Boronwë's teachers and important personal mentor.

Matrix: ruling trinity of the Sisterhood, composed of the Queen, Princess and Priestess of Swords.

Mayal: (May AL) Cadet 1st Class of the Sisterhood. Temporary swordmate to Boronwë.

Nameless God: an ancient, vicious, unnamed god of the pirates who once ruled the island which now belongs to the Sisterhood.

Shath: the hell-hound that runs at the heels of the Nameless God.

Teeth of Shath: name given to a natural barrier of sharp rocks which block the narrow channel on the eastern side of Ildana.

Vandalis: (van DAY liss) Princess of Swords. One of three women in the Matrix that rules the Sisterhood. Supreme military commander, answering only to the Queen, but with no power to command the Daughters of Death.

Vossë: (Voss uh) Kelki's lover. Son of a rich merchant, now on the run from the Sisterhood because of Kelki.

THE RITUAL OF WOMANHOOD

This ceremony dates back to the earliest beginnings of the Sisterhood, to an incident which took place when Ataluma (founder and first Queen of the Sisterhood) plotted to destroy the pirates who had enslaved her. She enlisted other enslaved women to join her plot. To test their sincerity and loyalty to her, Ataluma gave the women a cup from which to drink.

"If you act in true faith, the drink will not harm you," she told them, "but if you are false in your heart, if you plot or scheme against us or plan betrayal . . . the drink will kill you."

Ataluma then watched carefully as each woman took the cup and drank or refused to drink. In truth, she had only prepared a mild euphoric which would not kill at all. The true test was in whether or not a woman would drink of the cup, and to what degree she was willing or hesistant. In this way, Ataluma judged who she could trust and who she must watch.

As the daughter of a herbalist, Ataluma was highly skilled in the preparation and uses of plants. One of the most powerful drugs came from a wild bramble-flower which she planted on the island. Depending on the method of preparation, the drug of the bramble-flower is a mild euphoric, a powerful hallucinogenic, or one of the most lethal of all poisons.

After the downfall of the pirates, Ataluma took those women most loyal to her and trained them more carefully in the secret of the bramble-flower and other dangerous plants. This select group eventually became the Daughters of Death and were the only ones to know the secret of the bramble-flower. Her most trusted aide was in later years given the title of Priestess of Swords. Ataluma made the test of the cup a fundamental ritual amongst the Daughters. She increased the potency of the drink when she discovered that it could impart special powers to certain Daughters — an ability to see in the dark, a sensitivity to mystic powers, a degree of spiritual rapport with other Daughters, and in certain rare cases, even greater powers would appear.

It was later in the history of the Sisterhood, that a Priestess instituted the Ritual of Womanhood for the new groups of young warriors, now being trained from childhood on the island. The Priestess designed the Ritual to privide the Cadets with a celebration of their new status as warriors. But more than that, the Priestess used the ceremony of the cup to give the Cadets the mildest form of the bramble-flower. The euphoric drug enhanced the feeling of Sisterhood among the Cadets and, along with the ceremony, created a stronger bond between the individual women. To further build the importance and mystique of the Ritual, the Priestess declared it would be open only to the Cadets and those who had experienced it before, forbade discussion of the Ritual with outsiders or younger Sisters, and kept the younger Sisters locked away in their dormitories during the Night of the Ritual.

The Ritual proved to be a strong unifying tool and was maintained from that time onward.